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Becoming a Contemporary and Inventive Art Teacher

I received my undergraduate degree from Cornell College in Art and Education. During my studies, there was almost no overlap between the two areas of study. I was given an introduction to education through courses on educational psychology, exceptional learners and human relations. I took one course entitled Art Methods in which I was the only future art educator. My peers were all elementary education majors and the course focused on incorporating art into the general education setting.

After getting my degree, I got a job teaching Art in a suburban Chicago elementary school. The school has just under 500 students and serves students from PK-4th grade. Briefly describe the school (demographics etc.) . I had grown up in the area and went through the district myself as a student. My school is located in a fairly affluent area, and for an overwhelmingly Caucasian area, boasts the highest diversity of any school in the district. I worked for two years teaching 1st-4th grade students. During this time, I learned quickly that I was not adequately trained to teach my subject. I had minimal training and experience in designing and implementing curriculum. I had no experience or knowledge of how to accurately assess student knowledge and growth.

After two years, my district encountered economic hardships resulting in the reduction of art teaching positions. As I was the newest hired, I was the first to be let go. Rather than applying for other jobs, I decided it was time to go back and get an advanced degree to help me become a stronger educator. I researched schools and decided an online program would enable me to work and pursue a degree simultaneously. I decided on OSU's program because of their large art education department and their commitment to the profession. My first teaching position was previously held by Meaghan Brady Nelson who received her M.A. in Art Education

and went on to pursue her PhD. at OSU. I heard great things about the program and knew that it would facilitate my growth as an educator.

My experience throughout the program has been one of humility and excitement. I have gained an understanding and appreciation of the evolution of art education as a field. I have reprioritized my values, beliefs and ideas about what it means to be an effective teacher. The program has instilled new ideals of what art education can do, and inspired me to work harder every day to ensure my students become creative thinkers and artists. The following essays focus on two courses taken during the program: Jennifer Eisenhower's course on developing curricula and Sydney Walker's course on artmaking with meaning. These two courses have acted as catalysts for my intellectual and professional growth. As a result, I have completely reevaluated my pedagogy and professional goals. I have become a more reflective and inventive educator.

Curriculum is defined as the formal and official course content students must know determined at national, state and district levels. Ultimately, teachers are bound to and informed by these regulated standards. Dr. Eisenhower's course *Designing Meaningful Curricula* has given me a stronger understanding of all aspects of creating and implementing art curricula. In a reading included in the course, experts Gude and McCutcheon divide curriculum into three subgroups: the overt, hidden and missing curricula.

The overt curriculum is determined solely by an elite group of administrators. In this model, teachers are passive recipients of content material and are expected to convey this knowledge to their students. The hidden curriculum is content that is conveyed unconsciously and/or unintentionally to students. Even when teachers have no control over their overt curriculum, they still communicate personal values, biases and expectations by creating and

controlling the hierarchy of content material, tone and cadence during instruction, and amount of time spent on specific media, artists and themes. Finally, the missing curriculum consists of material that is not covered in the overt curriculum. Upon investigation of overt and hidden curricula, oftentimes many artists, media and themes are underrepresented. (McCutcheon, 1988, p. 195).

A successful and effective art curriculum is shaped by contemporary visual culture. The syllabus for this course contends, “The contemporary predisposes student learning toward relevance and significance, [thus] we strongly advocate framing the curriculum in terms of the realities of contemporary art and culture”. Visual culture consists of any visible aspect or component of the contemporary world. To create meaningful and authentic learning experiences, students must interpret images seriously and understand the context in which the images are created (Darts, 2006, p. 101).

The content that inspires and impassions students doesn’t rest solely on the canonical elements and principles of art. Meaningful art curricula encompass big ideas and themes that breach culture, time and place. Big ideas ensure that meaning making is at the center of art instruction instead of technique and skill. In an art curriculum, more specifically in units and lessons, the subject matter, medium and technique should all serve as the context for examining this higher idea. This is significant as it helps keep instruction concise and focused on relevant cross-curricular ideas and motifs. Creating and interpreting artwork require critical thinking skills, decision-making, and ultimately creativity and individuality. An art curriculum should be designed to support students in reaching these goals.

This course has helped me redefine my professional beliefs and values. An unfortunate practice I clung to as a new teacher was creating lessons that focused on skills and techniques. Without the knowledge to plan and create an effective curriculum, I fell into a stagnant,

traditional curricular design. This focused heavily on the elements and principles of art.

Although my students gained a strong foundation in various media, there was little depth to our lessons. Art became more like other academic subjects, with students trying to learn new skills and get the “right” answer. Skills and techniques were not the means to greater expression and exploration, but simply the end goal.

In contrast to the traditional view on curriculum, McCutcheon (1988) advocates a Deliberationist mode of curricular design. “Deliberation is more an attitude than a series of steps- the quest of as ideal a curriculum as possible for *these* students in *this* location” (p. 194). Since taking this course, I have deliberated and made changes to my curriculum as needed to suit the diverse needs of my students. I am in the unique position of teaching 17 sections of 1st grade. Thus I am able to evaluate my instruction and curriculum goals after each lesson and make necessary alterations to support each unique class. I change aspects of demonstrations, procedures, materials, and streamline instruction to enable students to get the information in the most effective manner.

A noticeable shift I have made in my classroom transitioning from lessons based on technique and skill to themes and big ideas. Techniques and skills can be used as a means to address more important and relevant issues. Van Laar and Diepeveen (1998) assert, “the best way one can understand, produce and critique art is by paying attention to what a work of art does: the beliefs it embodies, the social roles it assumes, and its interactions with its audience” (p. 7). For example, over the years I have taught several lessons on perspective and depth. Initially, I planned a simple project utilizing the foreground, middle-ground and background. However, as a result of this course, I now incorporate these skills into an in depth unit on community. One of the first lessons in the unit involves students drawing their own community

using the foreground, middle-ground and background. The goal of this lesson isn't to master these skills, but use them to explore the more relevant and interesting theme of community. As I become an active observer of my own curriculum and instruction, I continue to evaluate and improve my curricular design.

Changing my perspective from a traditional curriculum focused on skills and techniques to a Deliberationist model focused on big ideas led to several difficulties. I teach kindergarten and first grade art, so incorporating big ideas into my curriculum seemed daunting. My students are still developing their reasoning skills and deeper thought processes. Choosing a big idea that is appropriate for their level of development has proved to be a unique challenge. This year we have explored the ideas of nature, identity, home, community and love. Granted, first grade students are not able to explore these big ideas as thoroughly as older students, however with carefully constructed questions and scaffolding I have been able to facilitate meaning making in these units. Another issue I have when implementing big ideas is time. Big ideas are best explored throughout several lessons, but with limited time it can be difficult not to rush and expedite projects. All of these challenges have affected how I plan and implement my curriculum. However, I have seen improvement in the quality, breadth and depth of student work as a result.

This course introduced me to the overt, hidden and missing curriculum delineated by Gude and McCutcheon. After becoming aware of my own hidden curriculum, I realized I was teaching about mainly canonical and hegemonic artists. These artists shared many of the same identifiers: White, European, male and deceased. Students became habituated to the fact that the only artists they were going to learn about lived long ago and had no relevance to their lives. Artists who were excluded from the curriculum were deemed less important or

successful. Often times, female and minority artists are underrepresented. This communicated to students that the hegemonic white, male artists were superior and the only ones worth studying.

After becoming aware of this practice, I made a conscious change. Now I include several contemporary, local and minority artists into my curriculum. This year students are learning about Aminah Robinson, Frank Stella, Jessica Stockholder, Eric Carle and others. Not only do we learn about these artists, but the ideas they explore. Another practice that I adopted as a result of this class is incorporating visual culture into the curriculum. Our identities are so deeply woven into the fabric of culture, visual and otherwise. Incorporating aspects of visual culture into the curriculum allows students to negotiate their identities and other issues “through the currency of visual images within their education experience.” (McClure & Vollrath, 2006, p. 30).

Incorporating contemporary art and culture into my curriculum has been exceedingly rewarding for my students and myself. However, during this evolution I have struggled with a few issues. I aim to give my students a well-rounded experience in the arts. However, choosing which artists to incorporate into the curriculum can be a difficult task. I do not want to marginalize any students or create a potentially harmful hierarchy by ignoring important groups, ideas or themes. My students are grouped at seven tables, each named after an artist. Over the course of the year, we do a unit inspired by each. I have several criteria to fill when choosing an artist: Is the artist’s subject matter age appropriate? Does each artist work in a different media? Are there equal numbers of contemporary and canonized artists? Are female and minority artists adequately represented? All of these identifiers can be hard to fill by seven people. I teach in a blue-collar middle class area with a large Mexican and Eastern European population. My goal is to include artists that represent these cultures as well. While incorporating visual culture and

contemporary artists into my curriculum, I simultaneously infuse classroom content as well. I work to involve important themes and ideas students are learning in their general classroom into our art projects. It can be an impossible juggling act to create a successful unit with visual culture, contemporary artists and classroom content without the artistic content getting lost in the mix. The key is finding balance, which is something I continue to work on daily.

As a new teacher, I was hesitant to explore new or diverse materials. I only taught projects and lessons in media I was familiar with. This resulted in students creating mostly two-dimensional projects on paper. I felt more comfortable with traditional medium-specificity and stuck with simple and time-tested lessons. The results were predictable, but not inspiring. After taking this course, I was inspired to branch out. I am exploring more mixed-media projects and incorporating more three-dimensional lessons into my curriculum. I learned it is more important to try new media and experiment rather than having a mastery of every material and technique. I aim to expose my students to a myriad of different media in a way that is relevant, meaningful and exciting. This facilitates new discoveries and creates meaningful discourse on what defines art.

While incorporating more mixed and diverse media projects into the curriculum, I have been faced with challenges. Now that themes and big ideas are at the core of my lessons, I need to choose the materials that are most appropriate for the content. For example, when I talk about Gee's Bend quilts and Aminah Robinson's *Tar Beach* with my first graders, we create our own quilts. Instead of using markers or crayons, we recycle old fabric and clothing to make our artwork. Choosing appropriate materials can make all the difference when planning a curriculum. However, the content, not materials, should not determine the course of the lesson. As a result, I am focused on learning about new media. As a practicing artist, I work mainly in photography

and collage. However, I am learning to work in digital media, and well as sculpturally. I want to gain more experience and confidence in these new media to be able to adequately use them to my students.

Another area I struggle with in terms of curriculum design is collaborating with other teachers. I am my school's only art teacher, and as such, I am isolated from other art teachers in the district. The other art teachers work with older students, so I am the only art educator in the district working with my specific student population. We don't have time to meet and collaborate so it can be difficult to discuss curricula. I find it difficult to plan my curriculum when I have little to no idea what the students will be learning in higher grades at other schools. I intend to set up a meeting with the district art teachers and administrators to discuss the validity of coming together to create a scope and sequence for the district's art curriculum.

Learning about designing an effective curriculum has allowed me to more clearly see and articulate my beliefs and values as an educator. I have identified strategies, procedures and practices that are not meeting the needs of my students. I have since replaced these practices and continue to evaluate my own curriculum and instruction with an objective eye to ensure I meet current and best practices. After exploring my professional and artistic values and beliefs, I made the necessary changes to reflect them in my teaching practices.

One teaching practice I identified and later moved beyond was focusing on individual work. Students spend the majority of their day working independently. Like they so often are in school, students were isolated in my class and were unable to collaborate. We didn't often discuss our artwork or critique others' in class. A major goal in education (especially in the lower grades) is to empower students to transition from being dependent on their teacher to

becoming independent. Most, if not all work is individual and students are expected to work alone.

As active members of our school and local community, I strive to show them how people must work together to accomplish something. A new goal of mine, as a result of this course, is to help students transition from being dependent on the teacher, to independent, to interdependently working with one another. I have created visual reminders of what to do when students need help. One poster is titled, I Messed Up, Now What? The suggestions are: erase, then try again, turn the mistake into something new, ask a friend for help, ask Ms. McAllister for help, and finally, flip the paper over. When students have questions or need help, I remind them to check the poster and follow the prompts. For simple questions, students “ask three, then me”. I remind them that their peers are an important resource to use in class. This strategy enables students to depend on each other and raises self-esteem for those modeling appropriate behaviors and skills. It also allows me to move through the room giving one-on-one attention to students who really need it.

I am still in the process of making the shift to more collaborative art projects. However, I have come across a few roadblocks. I try and do a large public art project every year with my students. This year, the project is taking the shape of a community themed mural (as mentioned above). However, it takes a lot of planning, collaboration, communication and resources to be successful. I teach in two different districts on a part time basis, so I am only at each school for two days. I struggle to make time to meet with teachers and community members to plan the mural project. Our goal is to create a permanent mural and install it in the school. Earlier in the year I proposed a grant to receive funds for the project but was denied. I am struggling to find the means to create the project on our own. Another logistical challenge I have found with

collaborative artwork is the issue of ownership. When two or more students work on the same piece of art, it is difficult to determine what happens to the piece when it is completed. Who takes it home? How do I assess the students? There are no easy answers to these queries but I continue to talk with other art teachers to get their input. However challenging it might be, collaboration is a key component to success in the art room.

When considering collaboration in the art room, I took a deeper look into how students participate in class. Before this course, most class discussions consisted of me posing questions and individual students answering. There were several more confident students who actively participated, but many members of the class would sit back and only listen. It can still be difficult to get all students to participate in class; however there are many ways students can participate. Some students will never be comfortable talking in front of the class. In cases like these, I have found it is helpful to prompt students ahead of time to give more response time. Then students are able to form their answer and feel more confident speaking publicly. I have started to include different discussion techniques such as group conversation or think-pair-share. This ensures that all students are discussing the topic or issue at hand, without the stress of addressing the whole class.

I encourage students to find their voice and learn from each other. One way to help students become interdependent is to show them they all can contribute and have important ideas. I incorporate more open-ended discussions in class and encourage everyone to participate without fear of failure or making mistakes. I was inspired by the Art 21 assignments requiring us to reflect on artistic choices made by Do Ho Suh, Pepon Osario and Michael Ray Charles. These assignments helped me think critically about artists in relation to big ideas. More importantly, it allowed me to practice creating guiding questions to facilitate discussion and meaning making. I

want my students to actively participate in their education and be creative thinkers and problem solvers. The curriculum should engage students in critical examinations of art and help them discover what it is and what it can do.

Another teaching strategy I have introduced into my classroom is creating “checkpoints” and incorporating enrichment activities. In the art room, students work at their own pace. Several students finish early, while others need extra time and support to complete the same lesson. I have differentiated my lessons in order to support all students and ensure they are learning to their potential. However, when students completed a project, they were allowed to do free draw. As time went on, I observed students rushing through projects so they were able to do a free draw project with little or no structure, often resulting in a finished product that did not reflect their skill or ability level.

As a result of this discovery, I altered the nature of my curricular units and lessons. I structure my lessons with built in checkpoints so I am able to assess student progress at each step. Once a student completes a task, he or she gets a stamp and is then allowed to move on to the next task. This procedure works well with younger students and when they begin to take more ownership of their learning and become more successful with self-regulation, they no longer need to check in. Once students finish a project, they now have multiple enrichment opportunities. They can choose to:

- Help a friend complete a task
- Read a book about a related artist
- Write about their artwork (with the help of written prompts)
- Use a “how to draw book” to build drawing and compositional skills
- Do a coloring sheet which reinforces new concepts and techniques
- Use the “idea jar” for free draw prompts which encourage imagination and creative problem solving

All these free time activities relate to our lesson and inspire students to explore themes, artists and big ideas in new ways. However, at times, it can be hard to regulate all of these activities occurring simultaneously with other students working on assignments. Most students are able to make appropriate choices during free time, but others need more structure and fewer choices to be successful.

As I continue my reflection of this course, I am reminded of how I have changed the physical environment of my classroom. In previous years, I did not have as much trust and confidence in my students. I kept supplies out of reach so they would stay neat and organized. I had to plan extra time at the beginning and end of class to pass out supplies and to put them back at the end of each lesson. This took time away from instruction and I realized, was not the most efficient model of instruction. I found that this practice was perpetuating a cycle of dependence on me and as a result I reorganized my classroom to make supplies accessible to everyone. This transition required me to completely overhaul how the classroom was set up. I purchased clear containers and labeled each with the name of the supply in a few languages, as well as an image to make them accessible to all students. I labeled cabinets the same way so materials are easy to locate. It took students a few weeks to understand and take on the additional responsibility of getting their own supplies. Many students were resistant to the new responsibilities and wanted to go back to the more passive art experience. However, as students became more independent, they took pride and ownership of their learning and the art room itself.

Upon further reflection, I identified another insufficient practice. When I first started teaching, I wrote lesson directions step-by-step for my students to follow. However, after going over instructions, several students were hesitant to begin. I realized that in order to accommodate diverse students' learning styles, I needed to address multiple intelligences in my

instruction. I began to use visual images alongside my instructions to signify what materials were to be used. After each step of the direction, students volunteered to summarize for the rest of the class, to ensure understanding. I included more demonstrations (led by myself and peer helpers) and review of concepts in my curriculum. These changes proved to increase understanding and participation in all students. However, when redesigning curricular units and lessons, time is always an important factor. With the addition of these supplemental instructional strategies, I learned to streamline instruction in order to conserve studio time for my students.

These alterations presented a challenge to me initially. Students were used to coming directly to me for clarification. These additional supports I built into the curriculum are designed to help students be more independent and interdependent with one another. However, student behaviors are so engrained that many found it difficult to rely on anything but teacher-driven directions. This is particularly a challenge with younger students, as they still rely heavily on adult support in all aspects of life. However, with time, the majority of my students have become more self-sufficient in the art room.

In previous years, I have designed my classroom to give students the most space between their tables as possible. My underlying reason for this design was to ensure students had enough room to maneuver around the classroom. However, upon evaluating my curriculum, I realized that studio work was not the only component of art class. There were different activities equally as important as creating artwork. Students practice new skills and techniques on the board, and watch presentations and videos. There were several types of learning happening in the room, and the design of the classroom needed to reflect that.

After this realization, I rearranged the furniture in my classroom to accommodate different areas of learning. When you enter the art room, there is a large rug on the floor to

accommodate space for students to sit and view videos and presentations. There is a wall of windows with cabinets below them with clearly organized and labeled art supplies. At the back of the room, there is a wall of white boards, which display our project instructions and task analysis. There is also room for students to come up and participate in instruction by drawing on the boards. The other wall is full of cubbies (designed to be used in a general education classroom). I use these cubbies as art storage as well as free time space where students can do independent activities. In the middle of the room are seven tables, placed perpendicularly to allow for maximum movement between them. All of these ideas and changes did not come immediately, but rather as a result of collaboration and deep consideration. I met with and observed other general and art educators in their classrooms for inspiration. But by no means is my classroom design complete. As the needs of my students change, so will the design and organization of the room.

Another component of my classroom environment are the procedures we use. For any project, there are usually a multitude of supplies needed. My original strategy was to walk from table to table giving out individual jobs: “Sarah, you get pencils, Alex, you get paper, Emiliano, please get markers” etc. However, this took several minutes out of our studio time and often children would forget their jobs, delaying our lessons even further. I brainstormed strategies to replace this ineffective practice. I began by assigning each seat a number. I used vinyl gym tape to stick numbers on individual chairs. When giving directions, I would assign specific jobs or tasks to each number: “#1s, please get pencils, #2s, get paper” etc. However, after time, the tape began to peel off. Next I tried taping laminated number cards to each chair. This proved to be more effective, but as classes and teachers use the art room for a myriad of purposes, the chairs would always get moved around. I would have to begin every day ensuring the chairs

were at the correct tables. One day a student would come in and be #3, and the next week he would be #1. There was little consistency. Often times the numbers would fall off the chairs, making this system ineffective.

I became increasingly frustrated and spoke with the other art teachers in my district for advice. After this collaboration I found my current solution. I created a laminated poster for each table-top with numbers representing each corner of the table where students sit. This sign is fairly wear-resistant and is clearly visible for all students. Each student is the same number each class, thus saving time and avoiding confusion. This method is very effective with all ages and helps students work more efficiently. By objectively observing my curricular design in terms of the classroom environment, I was able to make necessary changes to improve the quality of my units, instruction and lessons.

Almost all information in the facet of curricular design was new to me. Before this course, I did not think of organizing content into units, but simply lessons, which were often unconnected and did not lead into one another. When writing lessons, I used a simple template I had been given in college. During this course, I learned (through trial and error) to break down the curriculum into manageable units, and break content and material into smaller lessons to accomplish my goals. In the course, I created a unit based on creative play. The structure and outline of the unit design helped me organize and streamline my thoughts to create an effective and meaningful curricular unit.

I am currently starting a unit on the big idea of community. I am working with my first graders to create individual community drawings and ultimately a large community themed mural. I included sections of my unit plan below.

UNIT PLAN

Big Idea: Community

Related Topic: our local community

Rationale: students need to learn about society and how they contribute to it. We are starting with the concrete idea of our school and local community. After these concepts are fully understood, students can move towards more abstract concepts of community such as state, national and global communities.

Unit Questions:

- What is a community?
- Why is community important?
- What things make up a community?
- What people make up a community?
- How am I part of my community?
- How can we improve our community?

Key Concepts:

- A community is comprised of people living together in one place who share ideals, beliefs, or common goals.
- Communities contain local businesses, organizations and leisure activities to serve the population.
- Being an active member of a community ensures your participation benefits the group

Artist #1: Romare Bearden: *The Block* (1971, 48 x 216 in)
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.61.1-6>

I chose to include Romare Bearden in this unit because he explores the idea of local community in the medium of collage. Bearden was a great observer of his community and depicted the people, places and events both simply and profoundly. I will show students his collage mural entitled *The Block*. In this piece, Bearden created an 18-foot long reproduction of a street in Harlem, which shows the people and places that comprise that particular community. He created storefronts and vignettes of local people going about their day. This example will help students to see their community in a new way and inspire them to create a visual representation of it.

Artist #2: Faith Ringgold: *Tar Beach* (1988/1990)
<http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/default.htm>

I chose Faith Ringgold because her work explores the idea of local community in a different medium. She uses art quilts to explore themes of family and community in a simple and relatable way. Her most famous work *Tar Beach*, is a rich quilt with a narrative included around the perimeter of the design. Ringgold's work is playful and accessible to children. Both Ringgold and Bearden's work compliment each other and provide a rich and meaningful exploration of local community. Both artists created work inspired by the same communities (in Harlem). This will provide an interesting opportunity for the class to compare and contrast their work on the same subject.

As I have improved and strengthened my curricular design, I have seen changes in the depth and quality of student work. Previously, students were content at mastering skills and techniques. But now, they use these as tools to explore deeper ideas. This shift has radically improved student motivation, as the ideas we explore are relevant to their experiences. Throughout the year we have explored the big idea of nature. In one project, students learned about the life cycle of trees. We began discussing the biology and needs of living things, as well as the annual cycle reflected in changes in the leaves. Students created fall leaf drawings of this process. We collected leaves from the ground and used various materials including pencil, oil pastel and watercolors to depict our leaves.





Next, students explored the related topic of adaptations in nature. We talked about how all living things adapt to survive in their environments. Students learned about how to use texture as an animal descriptor. They chose different animal parts and combined them to create their own creature. Each component had to have a different texture, visually describing how the animal adapted to survive. Then students created an imaginary environment for their creature to live in. Upon completing the project, students wrote about their creature to help others understand where it comes from and how it survives.



Name: Reido
 Teacher Code: 136

This is my creature. Its species is: sitciadiacepin
 Its name is: SNOWCINS
 Its habitat is: duGR
 It eats: FI
 It gets water from: LGC
 or fun it likes to: PLHidand SEEK



Name: Habhabas
 Teacher Code: 15

This is my creature. Its species is: cat fly dog Shark
 Its name is: Roey
 Its habitat is: In a cave
 It eats: Bugs
 It gets water from: the lake
 or fun it likes to: Jump Rope

We finally explored the related topic of habitats. Students learned how living things (no matter where they live) need food, shelter, water and oxygen to survive. Students chose an animal to depict in its natural habitat. They included all the components necessary for the animal's survival. To make their compositions more realistic, students learned how to create a sense of depth by utilizing the foreground, middle-ground and background. We first created simple drawings, but after looking at the collage of Eric Carle, we were inspired to turn our sketches into tissue paper collage.



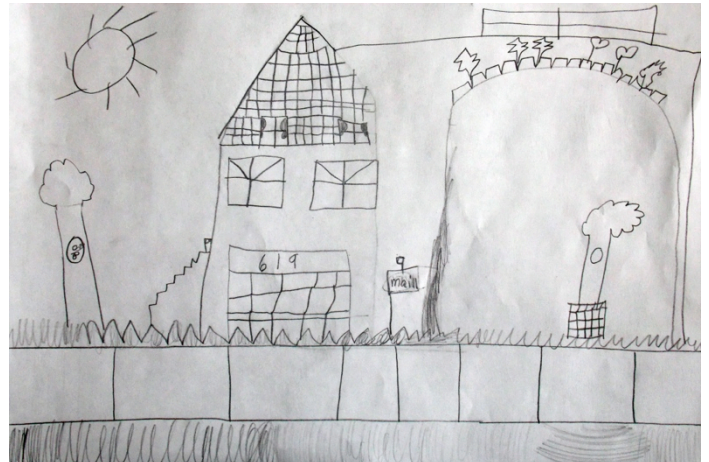
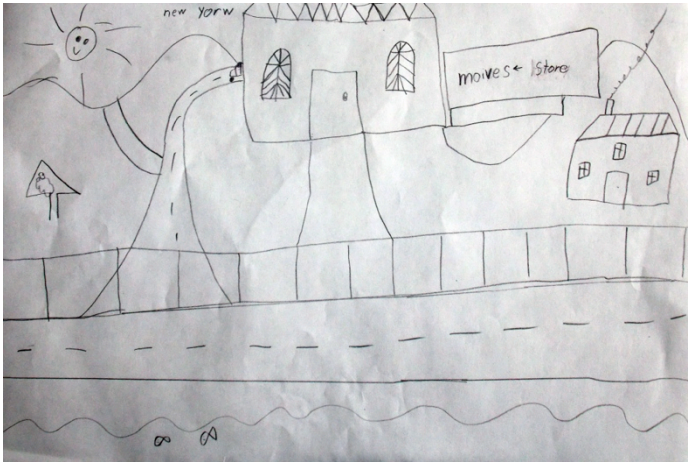
Dr. Eisenhower's course completely changed the way I view, organize, create and implement curriculum. Before her course I had a minimal and elementary understanding of curriculum, but I have gained a deep appreciation for the time, energy and care that

goes into creating an effective and meaningful art curriculum. This course has been instrumental in my professional development, as well as my instruction as an art educator.

Dr. Walker's course Teaching Artmaking with Meaning created a paradigm shift and gave me new values to incorporate into my teaching practices. Dr. Walker introduced the notion of big ideas, which now permeate my teaching. "Big ideas are what can expand student artmaking concerns beyond technical skills, formal choices, and media manipulation to human issues and conceptual concerns" (Walker, 2001, p 1). Incorporating big ideas into the curriculum ensures artmaking becomes a practice of meaning making. This year, my first grade students have explored the ideas of home, community, nature and love. Choosing a concept or idea is the main focus of the artwork, whereas the subject matter is the topic an artwork depicts or represents. Walker goes on to explain, "The big idea provides the conceptual ground for artmaking; the subject matter serves as the context for examining the big idea" (Walker, 2001, p 3). For example, my first graders are currently working on a unit focused on the big idea of community. The subject matter for our current lesson is their local community and town of Prospect Heights, Illinois. The context of students' hometown makes the big idea more relevant and accessible. One issue I have struggled with is differentiating and providing appropriate scaffolding for big ideas with my young students. The value of big ideas is that any group can explore them. My first graders all have valuable insights, experiences and background knowledge that can be utilized to create meaning within big ideas.

The following images are initial drawings created by my first graders of our local community. Students chose 3-5 community components to include in their drawing.

They used size and detail to show objects in the foreground, middle-ground and background. Students also experimented with overlapping to show depth.



Making personal connections is another value I have adopted with the help of Dr. Walker's class. To make learning more relevant to students, I incorporate personal interests and experiences in the art room. "Artists work from big ideas, but to motivate and sustain their interest and to make their ideas worth pursuing, they find personal connections to them" (Walker, 2001, p 19). In our community unit, students chose which

components of community are most important to them. In this project, I aim to create a link between personal connection and big ideas through the subject matter represented in an artwork (Walker, 2001, p 20). Students are creating individual community drawings of what they think is most important in their community. The wonderful thing about making personal connections is that there is no right or wrong way to contribute. Many of my students are Mexican and Polish and thus have unique cultural experiences to contribute. However, one issue I have had with using personal experiences to make meaning is that students aren't able to arrive at deeper meaning alone. My students are 5-7 years old, and have not fully developed their deductive reasoning skills. I take students' personal experiences and ask questions to facilitate deeper insight and understanding. For example, when defining community, students gave several examples: My home community, my big family community, my class community, the school community, Prospect Heights community, Illinois community, the United States community, the world community. All of these answers are correct, but students had more trouble explaining the larger and more abstract communities. Many students were eager to share about their family and classroom communities because they were more immediate.

Incorporating students' personal experiences helps maintain an open environment of multiple viewpoints. To facilitate this, I cultivate experiences that promote divergent thinking. Dr. Walker posits, "Problems with diverse and inconsistent elements produce a wider range of responses than those with more consistent elements" (Walker, 2001, p 53). Divergent or even binary thinking allows students to create different representations of the same idea. "Thinking innovatively is easier in the presence of resistance and

divergence, we, as art teachers, need to construct student artmaking problems that contain disparate elements” (Walker, 2001, p 53). Disparate elements can easily take the form of opposites, which is very developmentally appropriate for young students. The key is not to assign value to each term, that is, not to create unnecessary hierarchies. Elbow asserts that “tradition sees value in accepting, putting up with, indeed seeking the nonresolution of the two terms: not feeling that the opposites must be somehow reconciled, not feeling that the itch must be scratched” (Elbow, 1993). My students have completed exercises in choosing a pair of opposites. The challenge of the assignment is to represent the pair with appropriate media in a way that does not favor one over the other. This can be a difficult task, but helps students see and explore the merit in both options.

When promoting divergent thinking, I often embrace themes of nonsense and paradox. Young students are more adept at opening their minds to the impossible and improbable. They are still willing to be silly and try new things. Dr. Walker (2001) explains, “Usually, nonsense is synonymous with absurdity, considered the antithesis of sense, but ... these two seeming polarities actually intertwine in an interdependent relationship. In theorizing sense and nonsense, ... *common sense* and *good sense* protect thought from nonsense. Deleuze often voices his objection to common sense and good sense, considering them as unfortunate limits restricting our knowledge of the world”. My first graders embrace nonsense and paradoxes and delve into the realm of creative possibilities. “In acknowledging paradoxical sense, we forfeit the security of the fixed, stable and measured qualities of common sense and good sense in exchange for the uncertainty, precariousness and constantly changing relations of sense delivered from nonsense” (Walker). However, students can get so wrapped up in the fun of nonsense

and paradoxes that it is imperative to keep the focus on meaning making, rather than just silliness. I have gained these beliefs and values as a direct result of participating in Dr. Walker's course on meaning making. I have put these values into practice through several teaching strategies.

Throughout the course, I have learned different strategies and practices that have elevated my teaching and facilitated meaning making. One of which is designing and solving creative problems. "It is not enough for artists to focus on big ideas: artists also require strategies for exploring the content of the big ideas. Once such strategy is to create, or construct-and then solve-conceptual problems that address the big idea" (Walker, 2001, p 50). Conceptual problems refer to how the artwork is understood and what it communicates. These problems become the means through which to explore big ideas.

One conceptual or artist-generated problem is transformation. Transformation involves changing the representation or context in which objects, people and images are viewed. "Transformation alters reality, endowing it with new perspectives that can motivate artists and viewers to question what is normally taken for granted" (Walker, 2001, p 53). In an experience working with high school students, I introduced the challenge of transformation as it relates to self-portraiture. Students took pictures of

One conceptual or artist-generated problem is transformation. Transformation involves changing the representation or context in which objects, people and images are viewed. "Transformation alters reality, endowing it with new perspectives that can motivate artists and viewers to question what is normally taken for granted" (Walker, 2001, p 53). In an experience working with high school students, I introduced the

challenge of transformation as it relates to self-portraiture. Students took pictures of themselves and chose a specific part of their face to dramatize for the project. Next they gridded and worked from their photograph to create a charcoal drawing. This exercise drew focus to specific facial features of students and what they communicated about their identity. The following images are pictures of students working through each step of the project.



My teaching example





Another conceptual problem that can benefit artists is concealment or hiding visual information. “If we encourage students to experiment with coding or hiding information, they will work toward the realization that artmaking can be about not only concealment but also disclosure” (Walker, 2001, p 65). This is an effective strategy when working with big ideas because it forces students to identify the most important information communicated in the artwork. I introduced the concept of symbols and metaphors with my students and using coding, they created Native American inspired weaving projects. Students created their own symbols to represent important people, places and characteristics relating to their lives. Once the symbol artwork was finished, we cut it into strips and wove them into another piece of paper to simultaneously conceal and reveal the imagery and deeper meaning.

Yet another artistic problem is disruption, or changing the way viewers typically observe and understand visual objects. My students have experimented with disruption to comment on social conventions. By using unexpected juxtapositions or opposites, changes in social conventions, and subverting traditions, students bring attention to what is considered typical and normal. Much like Barbara Bloom’s diverse collections or William Wegman’s dog photographs, using disruption in artwork is an effective way to bring up important issues and making meaning. One issue I have encountered when incorporating conceptual problems in artwork is that students struggle to connect the problem with deeper meaning. When working with younger students, appropriate guiding questions and scaffolding are necessary to ensure the themes and strategies are accessible.

In conjunction to using conceptual problems, other techniques such as creative play, risk taking, experimentation, postponement of meaning and questioning help create meaningful and authentic learning experiences. Many professional artists incorporate purposeful play by utilizing the aforementioned strategies of transformation, concealment and disruption. I encourage my students to play and experiment similar to artist Donald Lipski. I do Surrealist projects like “Exquisite Corpses” to encourage the juxtaposition of opposing or differing forms. Students work collaboratively to create a disrupted creature. In the end, students reflect on their project and create new meanings from the opposing forms.

During the artistic process, students allow meaning to develop organically. I strongly identify with the notion that art is about evoking meaning, rather than communicating or presenting meaning. We all view the world through our unique culture, beliefs, values and experiences. Art then, should not and cannot be viewed solely from a single lens. Therefore, students should construct their own meaning when viewing a work of art instead of simply following the artist’s intentions. “Instead of shutting down discussion with the artists’ explanation of their intent, this strategy opens up interpretations; that is, once the intent has been revealed, viewers have a difficult time creating their own interpretations” (Walker, 2001, p 125).

I encourage students to experiment and take risks in their art to create meaning. Whether this involves using techniques from Richard Serra’s verb list or using nontraditional materials like plant matter, popsicle sticks or paper plates, students gain insight and experience in new modes of representation which can lead to new meaning. Dr. Walker (2001) advocates using “strategies that disengage [students] from the habitual

and predictable, giving [them] permission to allow meaning to emerge during and following the artmaking process, rather than pre-determining it in advance”.

Throughout the process of implementing these strategies into my lessons, I was met with some difficulties. When using techniques of experimentation, risk taking or creative play, it is imperative to maintain focus on meaning making rather than silliness. My students are rarely given opportunities to work in this way, and it can be difficult at times to keep them on track. Working within restrictions of curriculum, time and resources can strain the time they need to delve into creative play and exploration. I work with early elementary students, and while practices such as Skoglund’s experimentation with unusual media and Haring’s series of drawings are undoubtedly worthwhile, they can be challenging to differentiate for young students. Taking initiative to integrate discovery into your classroom can also be difficult when there are such strict time restraints on class sessions. However, I have found that with appropriate planning and periodic assessment, students can explore experimental techniques and enjoy authentic meaningful learning experiences.

Dr. Walker’s course gave me invaluable insight into planning, designing and implementing curricular units. When planning my units, big ideas remain at the focus. “Factors that require a direct engagement with the artmaking process include problem solving and decision making with predetermined boundaries such as media, subject matter, and formal choices” (Walker, 2001, p 95). By restricting choices and creating boundaries, I can facilitate students’ meaning making through the use of skills and techniques, among other options. One issue I have come up against is creating boundaries that benefit student artmaking without stifling it. Walker posits, “By setting

aesthetic boundaries, we do not predetermine all the decisions for students; rather, we provide a framework for their own decisions” (Walker, 2001, p 74). The key is to create boundaries that allow for students to manipulate materials in a way that will result in meaning making without overwhelming them with possibilities.

Building a knowledge base is a key aspect I have neglected in my past curricular units. I have been guilty of “overlook[ing] the importance of stimulating this component of the artmaking process; [and maintaining] a constant influx of new media, techniques, and gimmicks to sustain interest” (Walker, 2001, p 37). It can be difficult to make time to create a foundation of knowledge in each unit to enrich student learning. However, through this course I have gained an appreciation for this integral step of instruction. Incorporating “research about ideas, subject matter, artmaking techniques, and related artists’ works results in richer artmaking experiences for students” (Walker, 2001, p 46).

I am currently in the middle of a unit focusing on the big idea of community with my first graders. I used Dr. Walker’s unit template to organize and create five lessons around facilitating personal connections, knowledge building around the big idea, artistic knowledge building, artmaking, and coming to conclusions. Below I have included my Community Unit Plan, which has integrated all of the aforementioned strategies.

Community Unit Plan

Big Idea: Community

Related Topic: Prospect Heights Community

Unit Questions:

- What is community?
- What people, places and things make up a community?
- Why are communities important?
- How am I part of my community?
- How can I improve my community?

Key Concepts:

- Community is a group of people living and working together.
- Community is our immediate environment, which offers culture, relationships and experiences.
- Communities are comprised of social, economic, safety and health institutions (among others) to serve the interests and needs of its members
- By being active members of the community, people strengthen community bonds through inclusion, empowerment and engagement.

Rationale:

Students should learn about their local community and their place in it. Learning about community gives students an understanding of how structures and institutions help build and maintain a productive society. Learning about their local community motivates and inspires students to learn more about where they live and what they can do to improve their community. This gives students ownership and pride of their community and their learning.

First Artist:

Romare Bearden

The Block (1971)

I included Romare Bearden in this unit because his work utilizes collage and simple forms to depict scenes of community that are accessible to children. His work is inspired by real experiences, observations and imagination. He incorporates found materials and his own mark making to create mixed media collages.

I will show students Bearden's large scale collage entitled The Block (1971). In this work, Bearden depicted the daily happenings on a single block in his neighborhood in Harlem (on Lenox between 132nd and 133rd street, to be exact). He planned the collage while looking out the windows of his friend's apartment. He created typical scenes of the diverse people in his neighborhood. In the collage we can see families, old and young, people walking dogs, a funeral and several private and public spaces on the block. Bearden incorporated coding, concealment and transfiguration in his work. His art had a

kind of “kaleidoscopic interplay similar to the mechanics of jazz” (NPR). By taking recognizable imagery and reappropriating it in new ways he created something new.

Second Artist: Faith Ringgold

Tar Beach

I am also including Faith Ringgold because her work also focuses on the big idea of community. She employs diverse media in her work; most notably she creates large scale story quilts. Ringgold’s artwork and stories are very appropriate for young students and in line with the idea of identity, she explores concepts of race and equality. Ringgold was born in Harlem, very near where Romare Bearden lived. Both her and Bearden’s artwork reflects the very same community. Both artists explore the same big idea through depicting the same community, but with different artistic media. These two artists give students a unique experience comparing and contrasting Bearden and Ringgold’s artwork and what they say about community.

I will first read students Faith Ringgold’s book Tar Beach. The narrative tells a story of Cassie Louise Lightfoot growing up in Harlem. She has a dream of being able to fly anywhere she wants to go. In the book, Cassie flies over the buildings in her neighborhood while giving us insight into her local culture and community. After reading the book, I will show students images of Ringgold’s quilts she created to tell the story.

Assessment:

Throughout the project we will have several discussions about community and the importance of being active members in the community. I will utilize different strategies such as whole class discussion, small groups and think-pair-share. I will document the entire process through journal entries, pictures and videos of student and community involvement. I will also create a rubric to measure: student participation and involvement in each step of the project, student understanding of “community” and artistic skills and techniques utilized in the mural. Finally, I will create a student self-assessment to gauge students’ understanding of their own learning.

Lesson I: Personal Connections

BIG IDEA: Community	TOPIC: Prospect Heights Community
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UNIT QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is community?• What people, places and things make up a community?• Why are communities important?• How am I part of my community?• How can I improve my community?	KEY CONCEPTS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community is a group of people living and working together.• Community is our immediate environment, which offers culture, relationships and experiences.• Communities are comprised of social, economic, safety and health institutions (among others) to serve the interests and needs of its members• By being active members of the community, people strengthen community bonds through inclusion, empowerment and engagement.
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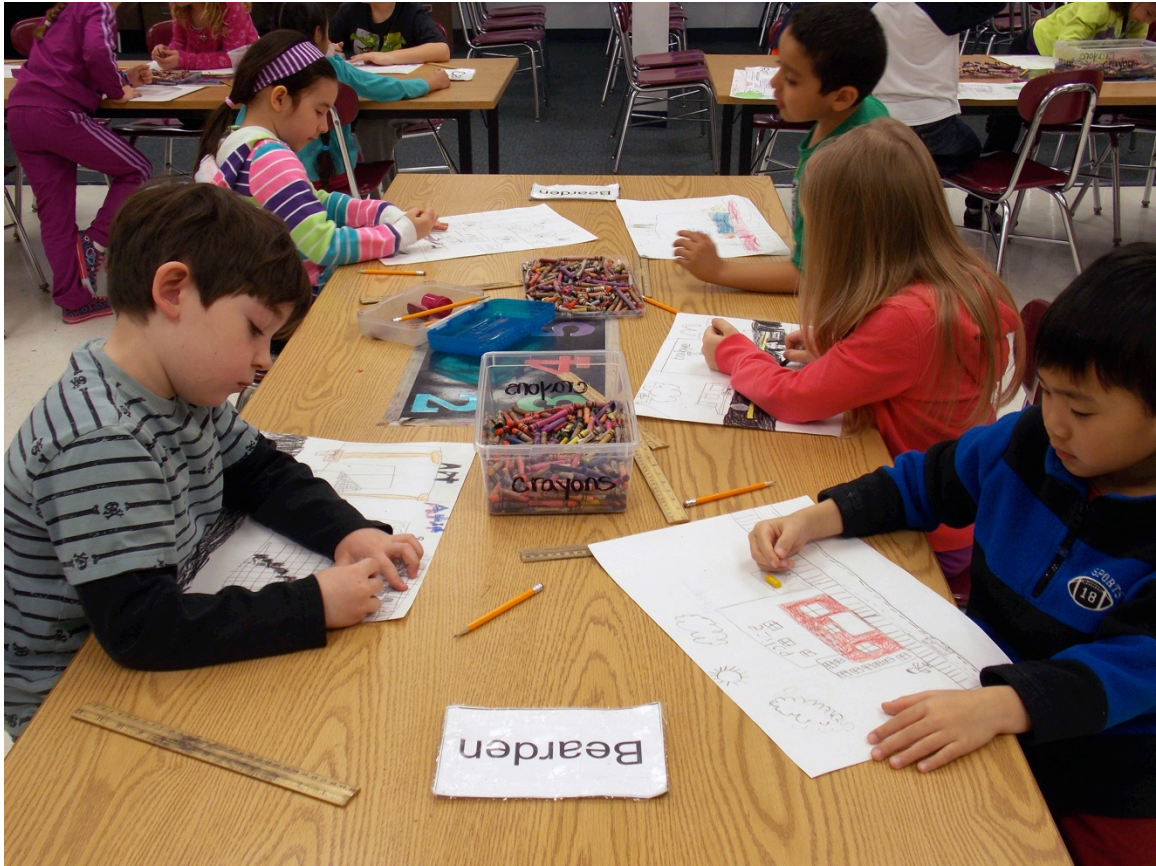
What will students do? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define what community is and why it is important• Discuss components of community and people that make up a community• Identify important aspects of their community	What will students learn from this activity? <p>Students will gain an understanding of the importance of community and how active participation in all aspects of community helps maintain our town a safe and happy place to live.</p>
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Lesson II: Life Knowledge Building About the Big Idea/topic (Knowledge Base)

BIG IDEA: Community	TOPIC: Prospect Heights Community
UNIT QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is community?• What people, places and things make up a community?• Why are communities important?• How am I part of my community?• How can I improve my community?	KEY CONCEPTS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community is a group of people living and working together.• Community is our immediate environment, which offers culture, relationships and experiences.• Communities are comprised of social, economic, safety and health institutions (among others) to serve the interests and needs of its members• By being active members of the community, people strengthen community bonds through inclusion, empowerment and engagement.
BIBLIOGRAPHY	IMAGES/OBJECTS <p>Photographs taken of places/buildings and people around the community</p> <p>*Have students bring in pictures</p> <p>*Get disposable cameras donated to students?</p>
What will students do? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Correspond with various community leaders about how they benefit and participate in the Prospect Heights community.• Talk with members from the local:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Police and Fire station○ Library○ Schools○ Stores○ Restaurants○ Retirement home○ Hospital○ Churches, Temples○ Etc.• Methods of communication can include letters, personal visits, skype, videos, etc.• Take pictures of places/people/things they see around the community	What will students learn from this activity? <p>Students will learn about the services offered in their community. Students will put faces to people who work in their community and learn about their jobs, duties and roles. They will gain an understanding and appreciation for how each community member contributes to the town.</p>

Lesson III: Artistic Knowledge Building

BIG IDEA: Community	TOPIC: Prospect Heights Community
UNIT QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is community?• What people, places and things make up a community?• Why are communities important?• How am I part of my community?• How can I improve my community?	KEY CONCEPTS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community is a group of people living and working together.• Community is our immediate environment, which offers culture, relationships and experiences.• Communities are comprised of social, economic, safety and health institutions (among others) to serve the interests and needs of its members• By being active members of the community, people strengthen community bonds through inclusion, empowerment and engagement.
ART OBJECTIVES <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students will examine and analyze artworks for content and deeper meaning• Students will compare and contrast Bearden and Ringgold's artistic strategies, media and meaning	ART OBJECTIVES <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create their own community drawing• Use foreground, middle-ground and background to create illusion of depth• Depict 3 of the community's most important attributes
ARTIST/ARTWORKS Faith Ringgold's <i>Tar Beach</i>	ARTIST/ARTWORKS Romare Bearden's <i>The Block</i>
BIBLIOGRAPHY <i>Faith Ringgold.</i> (2002, 1 1). Retrieved from http://www.faithringgold.com National Gallery of Art. (n.d.). <i>The art of Romare Bearden: A resource for teachers</i> . Retrieved from http://www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/bio1.shtm <i>The Metropolitan Museum of Art-Romare Bearden: Let's walk the block.</i> (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/interactives/art-trek/romare-bearden-lets-walk-the-block	





Lesson IV: Artmaking

BIG IDEA: Community	TOPIC: Prospect Heights Community
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UNIT QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is community?• What people, places and things make up a community?• Why are communities important?• How am I part of my community?• How can I improve my community?	KEY CONCEPTS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community is a group of people living and working together.• Community is our immediate environment, which offers culture, relationships and experiences.• Communities are comprised of social, economic, safety and health institutions (among others) to serve the interests and needs of its members• By being active members of the community, people strengthen community bonds through inclusion, empowerment and engagement.
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What will students do? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take responsibility for 1 panel of our community mural• Work together to make artistic, conceptual and technical choices on how to create their panel• Collaborate with other tables and classes to ensure the mural panels are cohesive	What will students learn from this activity? <p>Students will learn to communicate effectively, problem solve and work as a team to complete a collaborative project.</p>
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ARTMAKING PROBLEM <p>Incorporate portions from students' drawings to create a large scale mural of the Prospect Heights community</p>	CONCEPTUAL STRATEGY <p>Experimentation: students will experiment and take risks with diverse materials such as fabric, photographs, notes, and other found materials.</p>
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ARTMAKING BOUNDARIES <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students must incorporate realistic details from actual photographs of the community• Students must use 3 non traditional materials• Students must create a foreground, middle-ground and background in their panel	TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding of how to use size, detail and color to denote objects in the foreground, middle-ground and background
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Lesson V: Conclusions

BIG IDEA: Community	TOPIC: Prospect Heights Community
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UNIT QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is community?• What people, places and things make up a community?• Why are communities important?• How am I part of my community?• How can I improve my community?	KEY CONCEPTS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community is a group of people living and working together.• Community is our immediate environment, which offers culture, relationships and experiences.• Communities are comprised of social, economic, safety and health institutions (among others) to serve the interests and needs of its members• By being active members of the community, people strengthen community bonds through inclusion, empowerment and engagement.
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What will students do? <p>Classroom critique</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Groups will present their films and the class will have a short discussion after each.• First, the audience will give the group their general impressions of the video. The class will discuss these prompts:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What risks did they take?○ What techniques did they use?○ What was the best part of the panel?○ Suggestions for improvement?• After the short class discussion, the group can explain their intentions and respond to the audience's ideas of their work.• Finally, the class can look at the panel as it relates to the complete mural	What will students learn from this activity? <p>Students will learn to articulate, express and explain their artistic choices, as well as examine and critique the work of their peers.</p>
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Name: _____

Teacher Code: _____

Community Drawing Rubric

	Following Directions	Depth	Community	Craftsmanship	Effort
Minimal 1 point	The student did not follow instructions and followed their own desire.	Student did not create a foreground, middle-ground or background.	Student did not create a realistic community environment.	Project is unfinished and shows evidence that little attention was given to craftsmanship.	Student did not work to the best of his/her ability.
Basic 2 points	Student followed some directions while others were ignored.	Student used size variation to create a foreground and a background.	Student included 2-3 of the basic needs of a community.	Project is somewhat finished and shows evidence that more attention should be given to craftsmanship.	Student put forth effort when directed.
Proficient 3 points	Student followed directions with few detours.	Student created a sense of depth in the foreground, middle-ground and background.	Student incorporated 3-4 of the basic needs of community in their drawing.	Project is finished well and outcome demonstrates proficient levels of craftsmanship.	Student put forth strong effort.
Advanced 4 points	Student followed all of the directions thoroughly.	Student used size, color, details and overlapping to create a sense of depth in the foreground, middle-ground and background.	Student included at least 5 components of community needs.	Project is finished very well and outcome exceeds expectations.	Student worked extremely hard and did his/her absolute best.

Total Grade: _____ /20

Comments: _____

Dr. Walker's course has reoriented my beliefs, values, pedagogy and goals. As a result, I have become a more confident, knowledgeable and effective educator. By using big ideas and other strategies, I ensure my instruction facilitates meaning making and creates authentic learning experiences for students. This has been one of the most meaningful and useful courses during my time in this program.

As a result of taking these courses and participating in the MA program, I am confident that my knowledge, skills and drive as an art educator will enable me to reach students and inspire them to think creatively, explore their world visually, and create meaning through art. This program challenged me to reevaluate my previous notions of what it means to be an art teacher and the content and curriculum I use. The courses and readings have given me new perspectives and inspired me to think in different ways. My peers in the program have been an invaluable resource throughout my experience. We live in different areas, teach different populations and all bring valuable and divergent experiences and insight.

The essays serve as a comprehensive summary of the most important aspects of the program. I learned a great deal from all courses, but those about designing art curricula and creating meaning through artwork have had the greatest impact on my pedagogy. Writing the two essays helped solidify and articulate the extent of what I have gained from this program. Due to the extraordinary knowledge and experience of my professors and peers, I am a stronger, more sufficient and confident art educator. My teaching will never be the same.

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